

(June 2, 2009) FAA reauthorization could fast-forward O'Hare runways

Were you waiting with breathless anticipation for the U.S. House to pass the FAA reauthorization bill?

I was and here's why.

It's been about two years since the policy, which funds the Federal Aviation Administration, expired. Although Congress keeps giving the agency enough money to keep running annually, lack of actual, long-term revenue hampers progress on major aviation issues.

The legislation still needs Senate approval but the House version passed May 21. Highlights include \$53.5 billion for capital programs from 2010 to 2012 with \$12.3 billion allocated for airport improvements.

The bill includes authorizing airports to raise passenger facility charges - fees placed on tickets to pay for improvements - from \$4.50 to \$7.

I asked Rep. Dan Lipinski, a suburban Democrat and member of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, what the legislation means for this region.

"It means O'Hare can bring in more revenue that can go toward the modernization project," Lipinski said Friday, referring to Chicago's plan to create six parallel runways and a western terminal. "If O'Hare raises passenger facility charges to \$7, it will mean almost \$70 million more that will be collected a year."

That would be in addition to extra dollars being pumped into the FAA's airport improvement program, Lipinski added.

The move is significant for Chicago, which has built one new runway, extended another and has four to go with project costs estimated at \$8 billion and counting.

However, the airline industry is already making noise about higher passenger fees, arguing it will drive fliers away during troubled economic times.

"The industry does get to keep a tiny portion of that because it's in charge of collecting those," Lipinski said. "They get to keep a portion for administrative expenses. And there could have been other fees that would have been raised."

U.S. Rep. Peter Roskam, the Wheaton Republican whose district includes O'Hare International Airport, opposed the measure.

"Voting for a bill that raises ticket taxes to acquire my constituents' homes and businesses is not something I was sent to Congress for," Roskam wrote in an e-mail, referring to 600 properties in Bensenville that would be demolished as part of O'Hare expansion if Chicago prevails in ongoing legal battles.

As for the city's stance on the issue, passenger facility fees "are an important funding source for the O'Hare modernization program," Chicago Aviation Commissioner Rosemarie Andolino said in an e-mail, adding, "we believe it is critical for the U.S. Senate to move quickly on the FAA reauthorization bill."

Where's my luggage?

Of course, all this mega-airport construction stuff aside, there few things that irk people more than paying that extra \$15 to \$25 for suitcases - only to have them lost in airport limbo.

Lipinski noted the bill contains a provision he pushed for holding airlines more accountable for baggage that takes forever to get to the carousel. It authorizes the Government Accountability Office to study luggage delays and recommend a compensation system.

Lipinski recalled waiting an hour at O'Hare in January with other frustrated fliers for his bags to appear, only to learn they'd been taken off the plane and left to sit.

"Right now with airlines charging for bags, there needs to be higher expectations for levels of service," he said.

The reauthorization bill also includes provisions to set up a research center to develop alternative jet fuels, such as natural gas or even switch grass, and encouraging airports to recycle.

On the high-tech side, reauthorization also sets aside \$10 billion for NextGen, the FAA program that aims to use satellites instead of radar to transmit information about airplane locations.

"We're behind the times with the system that we have right now for tracking airplanes," Lipinski said. "Estimates are it will cut time off flights because they can fly more direct routes and you can have closer operation of airplanes with safety."